THE OFFICIAL MOVIE NOVELIZATION

ALITA

BATTLE ANGEL



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Alita: Battle Angel – Iron City (The Official Movie Prequel)

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ALITA
BATTLE ANGEL

THE OFFICIAL MOVIE NOVELIZATION

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In Memory of:

Susan Casper
Georgina Hawtrey-Woore
Geri Jeter

Battle Angels live forever



And as always for The Original Chris Fowler,
whose kind, loving, generous heart
makes everything possible

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CHAPTER 1

The floating city of Zalem was most beautiful at sunset, or so most people said. Or so most people *thought* most people said. In fact, Zalem was impressive at any hour of the day or night, hanging in mid-air like a good magician's best trick. It could have been some mythical realm—El Dorado maybe, or the Kingdom of Prester John, distant Thule or Camelot—except it wasn't lost. Everyone in Iron City could find it. All they had to do was look up and there it was: a perfect circle five miles across, wearing its skyline like a crown, ever present and ever out of reach.

Other than that, there were only three things the ground-level population knew for certain about the place: 1) the Factory in Iron City existed to support Zalem, sending food and manufactured goods up through long tubes that extended from it like graceful spiders' legs; 2) you couldn't get there from here—only supplies went up, *never* people; and 3) you never stood directly below the centre of Zalem unless you wanted to be crushed under the trash, junk and general refuse that suddenly

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and without warning rained down from the large, ragged hole in the underside of the disc.

This was just how the world worked, and no one now alive remembered anything different. A very long time ago there had been a War against an Enemy, and it had left the world in its current sorry state, where people on the ground had to scrounge around for whatever they could repair, revamp or remake, while Zalem sucked up anything worth having. No one had the time or inclination to wonder how people had lived before the War; the daily effort of survival kept them too busy for history.

Dr Dyson Ido, Cyber-Surgeon, MD, was one of the very few people in Iron City with a detailed knowledge of the past—the War, the Fall, and why Zalem was the only one of the original twelve floating cities to remain aloft. Right now, however, as the sun set on another long day of treating patients at the clinic, he wasn't thinking about history. He was picking his way through the sprawling pile of Zalem's refuse in search of anything salvageable, taking a circular path halfway between the centre and the edge.

The continual addition of new rubbish and regular scavenger activity meant the contents of the mound were always shifting; things buried deep in the centre were eventually pushed outwards and upwards. The area Ido was searching often yielded items that could be repaired or rebuilt, or sometimes just cleaned —Zalem's people were a wasteful bunch—while being far enough from ground zero to let him hunt without risk of being flattened by new arrivals. Assuming no one flushed a house down the chute, of course; so far no one had, or at least not all at once.

Ido spent the end of many days on the trash pile, using a

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hand-scanner to catch any stray electronic or biochemical signals from some bit of rechargeable tech. An observer with an especially sharp eye would have noted that although his long coat had seen a lot of wear, it had been nice once, too nice for Iron City. Then there was that old-fashioned hat—on anyone else it would have been a sad affectation, but it belonged on him, mostly because of his bearing. The way he carried himself suggested he was an educated man of some importance who'd taken a wrong turn off the open road and ended up in Iron City. But no observer would know he had once lived a life of privilege and gentility and, after losing everything, was now reduced to picking through the dregs and dross of a better world.

His previous existence felt as distant to him as the War nobody knew very much about any more. Nobody knew very much about him, either, except that he was a highly skilled cyber-surgeon who offered his services to Iron City's cyborgs at whatever price they could pay. For them, this was as miraculous as a floating city, only a hell of a lot more useful. They were grateful for his skills and he was grateful they never asked how he had come by them, or where he was from, or even how he'd got the small pale scar on his forehead. Everybody in Iron City had scars, as well as a past they didn't want to talk about.

Ido stooped to pick up a corroded metal hand, peering at it through his round spectacles. As he dropped the hand into the bag slung across the front of his body, he caught sight of a single glass eye nestled in the socket of a burned metal skull. The eye was perfect, without even a small crack. How had it escaped damage when the skull had been fried? Ido bent down to have a closer look and decided the eye didn't belong to this skull but had rolled into it by chance. All sorts of things happened by

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chance. If he hadn't come along at the right moment both the eye and skull might have sunk back down into Zalem's broken, unwanted crap, never to resurface. Or some nearby movement might have caused the eye to roll out of the skull as accidentally as it had rolled in and, unnoticed, would be mashed underfoot by an endless parade of scavengers.

Ido pushed himself to his feet and looked around, trying to decide whether he should continue while there was still enough daylight for him to see where he was going or quit while there was still enough night ahead for a few hours of sleep. Most of the other scavengers had given up and gone home, leaving only the desperate and the hardcore, the ones who were secretly hoping to find a real treasure. It was possible, for example, that a diamond ring had fallen off some Zalem aristocrat's hand into the trash by accident. Highly improbable, yes, but not *physically* impossible.

Selling it in Iron City for even half its worth—*that* was impossible.

Ido permitted himself a small chuckle and turned his thoughts back to the question of where to go next. Zalem had dumped a load about fifteen minutes ago; while there was no set schedule, there was usually at least twenty minutes between deliveries. *Usually*, however, didn't mean *always*. He was trying to decide whether to tempt fate in ten-minute increments—scavenge for five minutes, then stand back for another five. Normally he didn't take chances—he was the only doctor most of Iron City's cyborgs could afford and he took his duty of care seriously. That, however, was why he was weighing the risk. The centre hadn't already been picked over, which gave him a better chance of finding something usable, particularly servos.

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He needed more servos. He *always* needed more servos.

He was still deliberating when two things happened at once: his gaze fell on something half buried in the slope about three metres ahead of him, and he felt the scanner in his hand pulse ever so slightly. For a moment, he didn't dare move. If his eyes weren't playing wish-fulfilment tricks on him in the dying daylight, and if the scanner wasn't reacting to the last gasp of a dying circuit under his feet, he was looking at something worth more than a thousand diamond rings.

Keeping his eyes fixed on the shape, he moved towards it slowly, willing it to stay real and not turn into an illusion produced by a chance arrangement of junk. Then he was standing over it and, no, it wasn't a scrapyard mirage, it was a real thing that was really there, and he had found it by chance. But as any self-respecting, if outcast, scientist knew, chance favoured the prepared mind.

He knelt down and began gently excavating it from the trash, working as carefully as an archaeologist who had come across the find of the century. After a few minutes he sat back on his heels and stared at what he had uncovered. It was the face of a young girl: beautiful, angelic and completely impossible except in dreams of an especially pleasant, magical kind. He could tell he wasn't dreaming now by the sharp edges and lumps poking into his knees and lower legs, and the ache in his back.

This wasn't *her* face, either, not the one he wished so intensely to see again, but it could have been. She looked so utterly serene with her eyes closed and her mouth on the verge of a smile, as if she were dreaming of something wonderful. Only the rips in her skin—at the base of her neck, along the right side of her jaw, above her left eye—gave her away as synthetic.

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Ido leaned forward and began clearing away the detritus below her neck. The work progressed more slowly because his hands were trembling now and he had to stop sometimes to steady himself. After what might have been a minute or an eternity, he had uncovered her cyber-core: upper chest, one shoulder, her metal spine and the ribs caging her perfect white heart, which shuddered with each slow beat.

Hesitantly he put the scanner to her temple and watched, mesmerised, as the waveform on the readout confirmed that a person was still present.

"You're alive," Ido said, unaware that he'd spoken aloud.

He couldn't let her lie there a moment longer. He manoeuvred his hands around the broken fragment of her form and lifted her out of the trash, holding her up in the fading daylight, wondering how anyone could discard her as if she were no more than a broken doll, and feeling something he had not felt since the birth of his daughter, and had thought he would never feel again when she'd died.

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CHAPTER 2

Nurse Gerhad had swapped the surgical instruments on her cyber-arm for a normal hand in preparation for going home when she heard the basement entrance open and close. After a busy day treating patients and trading for parts, Ido had insisted on going out to see what he could find in the trash heap and hadn't minded when Gerhad said she was too tired to go with him. She wasn't as good at it as he was anyway, even when she wasn't tired, because of her personal feelings. The mere idea of picking through the discards of some unattainable and supposedly better world made her lose the will to live; actually doing it made her want to die.

Not that she'd ever known anything different. Her family had always lived in Iron City and most of them still did. One or two adventurous sorts had taken off in search of something better in parts unknown, and had never been heard of since. Gerhad didn't think this meant anything good. She had never considered doing anything like that herself; as far as she knew, the Badlands weren't hiring nurses, or anyone else for that

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matter. And even if they were, she doubted there were any other Dyson Idos out there. There sure weren't any others in Iron City, unless you counted the ice queen, and Gerhad most certainly did not.

Thinking of Ido's ex was something she preferred not to do, ever, and she wouldn't have, if it wasn't for what Ido had brought back. The way he'd come running up the stairs, Gerhad thought he had a bag full of servos. They needed more servos. They *always* needed more servos. But instead—

The cyber-core now locked into the stereotactic frame was the last thing she had expected him to bring back, right after a bag full of diamond rings. Well, if she'd found a discarded cyber-core showing the existence of a person, she'd have done the same. But she recognised the face; it was impossible, it could not be. And yet it was, big as life, and a heartbreak for sure. She wasn't certain how that would work since the doc's heart was already well and truly broken, but life could be very inventive.

After securing the cyber-core in the frame, he'd run back down to the basement for something. She'd known what he was after but she still caught her breath when he reappeared, carrying what looked like a child's body in his arms. In fact, it *was* a child's body, one that Ido had made. But the child had never used it and Ido had put it into storage, all those heartbroken years ago. Gerhad's feelings were mixed as she watched him lay it gently on the operating table next to the cyber-core in the frame.

It was beautiful, a work of art and an expression of profound love. She understood why Ido had packed it away unused, but she had also felt there was something inherently wrong about letting something so extraordinary go to waste. For a while,

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she'd hoped he might someday reach a place where he could let someone else benefit from his creation. But that would have meant he was healing, and healing was the one thing Ido would never, ever allow himself to do.

Ido had been jumping around the room, making preparations for surgery, shooing Gerhad away when she tried to do anything more than sterilise her own instruments. He was in the midst of recalibrating the micro-surgical robot arms when he suddenly turned to look at the slumbering cyber-core. After two hours of soaking up a pre-op infusion of brain nutrients, the cyber-core's eyes were now moving restlessly back and forth beneath the closed lids. Correction: *her* eyes, *her* closed lids; as the revival process went on, she looked more and more like the girl in the holo that Ido stared at countless times a day, every day.

Now he went over to the frame and reached out to touch her cheek. "What are you dreaming, little angel?" he asked with a tenderness Gerhad hadn't heard in a long time. He turned to her and she was shocked to see tears in his eyes.

Abruptly, he was jumping around again, setting up the micro-surgery workstation, running diagnostics, rechecking the robotic arms. He never said a word to her but he didn't have to. Gerhad was a registered nurse trained in cyber-surgery. She always knew what to do.

* * *

It wasn't the longest twenty-four hours Gerhad had ever spent in an OR but it was definitely the most intense. Ido had been a man in a fever, or a man possessed, working the micro-surgery arms and demanding she read data outputs from half a dozen different

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screens to him continuously, only because he didn't have six extra pairs of eyeballs to read them himself. She had no idea how he kept all the figures straight while he guided the micro-surgery instruments through all the tiny connections. He was just that brilliant—there were still times when she was awestruck by the breadth and depth of his intellect.

Like now, she thought as she watched the spidery surgical arms dancing in a delicate ballet choreographed by Ido. He didn't *have* to hover over the instruments while they worked—he'd designed and built them himself and his surgical machines never malfunctioned unless you hit them with a hammer, and sometimes not even then. But it was more than his making sure nothing went wrong. The micro-surgery instruments carried out procedures that his own steady and practiced hands were simply too big to accomplish; as such, they were extensions of himself, and he had to witness every connection of every blood vessel, every muscle fibre, every nerve.

Ido turned to her, nodded almost imperceptibly. She fetched two bags from the fridge. One was filled with standard biological human blood, heart's-blood; the other, twice as large, contained iridescent celestial-blue cyber-blood. The term "blood" wasn't quite accurate, as the latter had a lot more to do in a cyborg body, using nano-machines instead of white or red blood cells. Having only one cyber arm, Gerhad didn't need as much as this girl would require for a Total Replacement body, even one smaller than an average mature adult.

Gerhad placed the bags in the transfusers and set the rate of flow for each; all Ido had to do was trigger them. He grunted his thanks and dismissed her by way of a head jerk, though only temporarily; he expected her to remain handy and alert until

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further notice. At one time, Gerhad wouldn't have tolerated grunts and head jerks from a doctor. She still wouldn't, except for Ido.

* * *

The day Gerhad met Dyson Ido, she had been lying in a bed in post-op, mourning for the career she had lost along with her arm. She'd known who he was—everyone at the hospital knew Dr Ido for his work with cyborg patients. Gerhad herself had referred people to his clinic.

When Ido had told her he could not only save her nursing career but enhance and improve it, she'd thought he was a hallucination generated by some rather iffy painkillers—not an unreasonable assumption. She was on staff at the hospital, and the Factory had been shorting their supply of meds. The pharmacy had become desperate enough to seek out alternative sources; as a result, in the last couple of weeks, people who came in with broken bones went out tripping balls, and migraine sufferers spent their nights going to raves and kissing everyone. Oddly enough, there wasn't a single complaint from anyone, but it was no solution.

The Factory had promised to make things right, but they'd taken their sweet-ass time about it. The Head Nurse told them there was nothing any of them could do except pray for rain and, *For God's sake, don't get hurt.*

Three hours later, her shift over, Gerhad walked out of the front door of the hospital just in time for an out-of-control gyro-lorry to sideswipe the front of the building, taking out all the windows, half a dozen newly installed hanging plants, a few No-

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Parking signs, and her left arm.

Somehow, she had remained conscious, although there were a few bad splices in her memory. One moment, she'd been stepping out on the sidewalk with the door of the hospital closing behind her; the next, she was lying on the ground amid broken glass, chunks of cement, clots of damp, dark dirt and torn-up flowers. She remembered knowing her arm was gone and, with it, her nursing career, such as it was.

Nursing wasn't always everything she'd hoped it would be—there was an awful lot of repeatedly patching up people who couldn't stop making the same mistakes, feet that hurt all the way up to her hips, and more vomit than she could ever have imagined. But there were good days, too, when she encountered someone who refused to be beaten down by circumstance, or at least weren't their own worst enemy. And there were the kids, the ones who had not yet begun to grow up too fast.

The pay was crap and sometimes it got crappier. They couldn't lay anyone off because they needed every warm body they had, so there were pay cuts. Always with the Factory's *sincere* apologies, played over the background noise of shipments travelling up to Zalem via the tube that arced right over the hospital from a nearby distribution annexe. Making ends meet required a lot of double shifts—not at overtime rates but at regular pay, sometimes less.

But being a nurse wasn't a *job*, it wasn't just a way to make a living while you looked for something better, it was a profession—a vocation. Nurses *wanted* to be nurses; it was the only thing Gerhad had ever wanted to be. Nursing had given her focus and discipline, which she discovered were crucial to surviving in a world that was shambolic and uninspiring at best

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and, at worst, pitiless and corrupt.

And now, thanks to a lorry driver who hadn't been qualified for a commercial vehicle heavier than half a ton, it was all gone. Compensation? She could whistle for it. The truck had been Factory-owned, and it hadn't been a kingpin like Vector behind the wheel, just some poor shlub who vanished without leaving a name. And that was the state of the nation, thank you and good night.

The next time she woke up, her upper body was locked into a stereotactic frame; Ido had her positioned so the nerves in her shoulder could most easily make the acquaintance of those in the cyber-arm. Ido was hovering over the robotic arms, his face set in an expression of intense concentration, as if Gerhad were the most important person in the world and he were performing the micro-surgery with his own hands.

She'd drifted in and out of consciousness, feeling no pain and seeing nothing psychedelic—later she found out he made his own medications, including anaesthesia—until she finally woke up completely and got her first good look at the work of art that was now part of her body.

"I don't know if I'm safe having an arm like this," she told him, admiring the designs etched into the metal. It made her think of an antique silver tea service. "I might get jacked the minute I step outside."

His smile had been knowing and even a little gleeful. "This town isn't full of geniuses but pretty much everybody knows better than to mess with my work."

She nodded, still admiring her arm. "I've treated more than a few patients who had parts they couldn't possibly afford. And now I'm one of them."

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"Oh, there's no charge," he said, enjoying the look on her face. "Of course, there *is* something *you* can do for me that none of my other patients can."

That would have rung alarm bells except he didn't sound sleazy. "What?" she asked, more curious than wary.

"Work for me. I need a nurse and I can pay better than the hospital."

To her surprise, she'd said yes immediately. Then she'd waited for *that* moment, when he put his hand where it didn't belong and she had to break his nose or dislocate his shoulder, but it never came. She had accepted purely for the money, thinking she could build up a nest egg and if the job sucked, go back to the hospital. But before long, she decided it would be just plain stupid to give up an opportunity to work with a genuine, no-foolin' medical genius.

She had gone to work for Ido shortly after his heart had been well and truly broken, but other than that, she knew very little about him. He wasn't from around here, but you only had to talk to him to know that. He wasn't just bright, he was educated far beyond anything available at ground level, unless there was an ivory tower in some faraway land beyond the Factory's reach.

But Gerhad was certain Dyson Ido had not travelled from some far-off land to fetch up in the dead end of Iron City. No, he was from somewhere much closer, a place everybody in Iron City saw all the time but was more remote than the moon and just as unattainable.

Travel from ground level to Zalem was strictly forbidden, a law the Factory's Centurians enforced by lethal means. No heavier-than-air flight of any kind was permitted, for any reason; just flying a kite could get you killed. The Centurians weren't

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programmed to distinguish between machines and living creatures; as a result, whole generations of Iron City residents had lived and died without ever seeing a bird except in photos.

No one knew if Zalem's residents were equally restricted or whether the view from on high convinced them to stay where they were. Gerhad suspected it was the latter. Not that it made any difference—there was no way for anyone in the floating city to get to the surface.

Well, no way save one, and that was one hell of a long fall.

Gerhad didn't think many people could survive something like that. A parachute was out of the question—the Centurians would blast it into confetti and make mincemeat out of the person attached to it. The trash heap below would hardly provide a soft landing; at terminal velocity, a person was likely to pile-drive through several layers of accumulation, and the scrap metal would be like shrapnel.

You'd have to be some kind of batshit genius to figure out how to come out of that alive—and not just you but your wife and kid, too. And if the kid was kind of fragile, say, disabled—Gerhad had thought about it for years and she was still baffled.

Nonetheless, all three of them had survived. The girl had died a few years after that, in circumstances that were as brutal as they were pointless. Which, in Iron City, was unremarkable.

The real puzzler, though, was why Zalem had let someone so brilliant leave. Or had they? Gerhad wondered. They might grow the population a lot smarter up there but she doubted there was anyone who'd have made the doc seem dull by comparison. He was—she looked for a word other than *intense* and came up empty. Because that was what he was: intense. Everything he did for his patients mattered as much to him as it did to them,

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and she was sure he had always been this way. By all rights he should have gone crazy long ago but somehow he'd stayed sane. Or just sane enough.

Maybe Zalem *hadn't* let him go, Gerhad thought. Maybe leaving had been *his* idea. He certainly hadn't tripped and fallen over the edge by accident.

* * *

Ido turned to Gerhad, about to say something, and saw she had fallen asleep in the chair, head resting on her cyborg hand. He considered waking her, then decided not to. The embodying procedure was almost finished. He turned back to the girl on the table, to the white ceramic-and-titanium heart in her open chest. It was beating more quickly now, at a rate normal for a girl fast asleep and lost in her dreams.

She was alive.

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CHAPTER 3

Waking was like drifting up from the depths of a warm, dark ocean. It was gradual, requiring no effort on her part, proceeding at its own rate. Time passed, or maybe it didn't, or it stopped and then started again. After a while—an hour or a week or a century —she opened her eyes.

The ceiling above her was blank except for a few cracks. There was nothing distinctive about it or even familiar—it could have been any ceiling anywhere. She was certain, however, that it wasn't the same ceiling she'd gone to sleep under. If there'd been a ceiling at all.

She yawned, enormously and deeply, her eyes squeezing shut as her lungs expanded to their limit. She had half a second to think her chest felt a little strange before she opened her eyes again and saw the hand she had reflexively covered her mouth with.

The hand wasn't hers. It wasn't even human.

Like that, she was awake; looking at the hand, turning it this way and that, wiggling the fingers. This wasn't *just* a hand.

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Someone had *envisioned* this hand, then brought it into existence, made it something that could move, that could touch and be touched.

And it was *beautiful*, decorated with designs of flowers and leaves and curlicues rendered in perfect, delicate lines. The metal inlay in the centre of her palm was etched with similar designs, only much smaller. She closed her hand slowly, then opened it again, watching the way all the sections worked; it had the same range of movement as a flesh-and-blood hand. Where there would have been pads at the base of each finger, she had small rounded sections, each one decorated with an exquisitely intricate sunburst. The metal shining in her finger joints was the same as that inlaid in her palm.

She even had fingerprints—but, oh, what fingerprints! The curved lines etched into the top two joints of each finger were a glorious riot of crashing waves that morphed into impossible flowers, clouds, arcs and spirals, dancing and swirling in a way that was exultant, even defiant.

On the back of her hand was a flower so complex she would have to study it at length to see all of its details. The thought that someone would give her something so beautiful was a surge of light and warmth inside her.

Her wrist was mechanical, its articulation and segments even more complex than her hand. Past that, more flowers blossomed in symmetry along her outer forearm, the lines delicate and perfect, some of them spilling onto her inner arm, right up to her mechanical elbow. The design resumed all the way up her bicep to a gold inlay etched with lines very much like her fingerprints. The segments that made up her shoulder were outlined in silver and gold. She'd never seen anything like this. If she had, she'd

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have wanted it immediately.

And her left arm?

She pulled it out from under the covers and was relieved to see that, yes, she had the set. She stretched her arms out so she could admire them both. With arms this beautiful, she might never wear long sleeves again.

The rest of her—what was that like?

Nervously she pulled the covers back. For a long moment she could only stare at herself in wonder. The whole body—*her* whole body—every bit of it, was a work of art. She stared at the —at *her*—creamy pinkish "skin" and the beautifully etched silver and gold inlays. How long had she been asleep?

And while she was at it, where had she woken up?

The bedroom was no place she knew, but she got the impression from the funny little figures on the shelves, the pictures on the walls and the stuffed bunny on her pillow that it belonged to a young girl. A *smart* young girl who loved to read —there were shelves and shelves of hardcopy books. But other things in the room didn't seem to belong—a shabby briefcase bundled with a stack of old file folders, for instance. Young girls didn't go for briefcases, not even smart young girls. A stuffed animal maybe—she picked up the bunny and ran a finger along its floppy ears. The fur was soft with comfort under her fingertips; she could practically feel the pattern of how the little-girl hands had petted and stroked it countless times. The bunny was old, too, just like pretty much everything else she could see. The very smart young girl who'd lived here must have been long gone by the time Alita had been tucked into her bed.

Who had brought her here and how had they done it without waking her? Because she had the strong feeling she had gone to

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sleep in a place far away. She couldn't remember where that had been, or what she had been doing there, or, now that she thought of it, anything at all.

But even if she didn't know where she was now, she was sure of one thing: it was safe. The place was old and a bit shabby, but it was intact. There was no visible damage from heavy munitions or explosives. Nor could she see any weapons stashed in convenient spots where they'd be easy to grab in an emergency, not even—she checked—under the bed.

She didn't wonder why that last thought had crossed her mind. It seemed only natural to think about safety after waking up in a strange place, not to mention in an unfamiliar body. Yes, the body was pretty, but was it useful? Was it able enough, fast enough, tough enough?

Her gaze fell on the full-length mirror across the room. She walked over to it on her unfamiliar but very beautiful legs and stood holding her arms slightly away from her body so she could see everything: the silver and gold inlays at her collarbone and the ornate but delicate artwork just below them and in the centre of her chest; the complexity of her segmented torso; the etched gold inlays at the tops of her thighs and the designs that curled along the front and sides of her legs above her complicated knees; the perfect symmetry of the fantasy flowers on her calves, mirror images of each other. She could actually imagine the work in progress, someone bending over each part in turn, working under a bright light, never looking up until it was perfect. The person in question was a dark blurry shadow with an impossibly steady hand and eyes that didn't see only surfaces —they saw all the way *through* the world, into its essence.

But the beauty she was admiring was a doll's beauty. The

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realisation brought her back down to earth with a thump. She was a toy girl, lacking the crucial anatomical features of a real person. There were pretty flowers along the line of collarbone, and gold and silver inlays just above the place on her chest where her breasts began, and more inlays below them. But her breasts were blank, featureless.

She pressed a finger to one of them, expecting it to be as hard as the rest of her, and was surprised to feel it give. Her body wasn't completely hard metal; there were some soft places.

Moving closer to the mirror, she touched her face. That was soft, too, but she was certain it was her own, not something that had come with the body. She looked down at herself and made a slow turn, looking over one shoulder and then the other. She was pretty in back, too; her behind also had some give, though it wasn't as soft as her breasts. But like her breasts, it wasn't real. She moved closer to the mirror, looking into her own eyes, but the toy girl in the mirror didn't seem to know anything more than she did. Some impulse made her tap the mirror with her fingers. She heard a quiet *tik*, metal on glass.

"Well, hell," she said, just to hear her own voice. It didn't sound strange to her. Whoever had given her this work-of-art doll body hadn't messed with anything above her neck. Or so she hoped.

As she turned away from the mirror, her gaze fell on some clothing folded up on a chair. She picked them up—a sweatshirt and some cargo pants.

Cargo pants were back in style? She must have been asleep for a *really* long time.

* * *

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The door of her room wasn't locked, she discovered, and it was an immense relief to know she wasn't a prisoner. Of course, a young girl's room made a very unlikely prison cell, but as she didn't know where she was, she couldn't be sure of what was unlikely and what wasn't. Plus, cargo pants were back in style; all bets were off.

Careful to move soundlessly, she stepped into a short hallway, where she saw a flight of stairs. This was a private home. Did it come with her new body? If so, it didn't match; the place was clean but it was as old and shabby as the room where she'd awakened.

As she moved to the top of the stairs, she heard voices from below. Listening for a few seconds, she determined there was one woman and at least two men down there, although she couldn't make out the conversation. The voices didn't sound hostile, though. Time to see what she had landed in, she thought, and crept down the stairs, still moving silently, listening as the voices grew clearer.

When she got to the bottom, she found herself looking into a room that seemed to be some kind of clinic or laboratory. Was this place actually a hospital?

"Well, that's the best I can do for now," one of the men said. He was bending over something on a tray in front of him while a tall, dark-skinned woman in blue scrubs stood nearby; a nurse. "They don't make parts for this model any more."

The man moved back and she saw he'd been working on a piece of machinery that had obviously seen a lot of use. The metal was scratched and dented, with a few parts clearly taken from something else and adapted to fit. It looked heavy and clumsy and it was attached to the shoulder of a second man

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sitting in a chair beside the tray.

"I'm real grateful, Doc," the second man said, lifting the thing off the tray and testing its movements. "I'll be getting some overtime next week." He got to his feet and pulled up the top half of a greasy coverall, zipping it with his machine arm.

"Pay me when you can," said the first man in a kind voice.

The second man picked up a sack lying on the floor beside the chair. "Here, I got these for ya. My wife works out at Farm Twenty-two."

The woman chuckled. "Keep getting paid in fruit and we'll be pickin' these ourselves."

Just as she was thinking that she should look for a way out, the woman spotted her.

"Well, hello, sleepyhead." The woman smiled at her and she automatically smiled back. You couldn't assume someone was okay just because they smiled at you, but something told her this woman meant her no harm.

The man with the mechanical arm also smiled at her, but the doctor was startled. Maybe he'd thought she would still be asleep. He was pale with blond hair and round spectacles that gave him the appearance of a man who'd just been interrupted in the middle of reading something long and complicated. The woman—the nurse—ushered the man with the mechanical arm to a door across the room while she and the pale man stared at each other.

This was the man responsible for her beautiful work-of-art body, she realised. He had long fingers that seemed to move in a precise way even when they were just fidgeting with his lab coat and the small parts and tools in the pockets. Now that the surprise of her appearance had worn off, he was looking her over

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with the sharp, alert eyes of someone who knew so many things, far more than most people. She could also see he was a bit haggard, like he'd had a lot of long days and not enough sleep.

Unsure of what to do or say, she took a step forward and was briefly blinded by a shaft of sunlight coming in from a high window. The warmth felt good on her face.

"How do you feel?" the man asked her.

She sat down in the chair where the man with the heavy arm had been. "Okay."

Abruptly he reverted to his role as a doctor, grabbing a small flashlight so he could look into her eyes, then her mouth. He felt the area under her jawline and then the length of her neck, his long fingers expert and gentle.

"Any pain anywhere?" he asked, feeling her hands and bending each finger. "Numbness? Motor dysfunction?"

When he went into doctor mode, he went all the way, she thought. "Well, I'm a little… hungry."

He ushered her out of the laboratory or whatever it was and into a small kitchen. Seating her at the table, he reached into the bag his patient had given him and held out a round orange thing.

"Eat this," he said. "Get your sugar levels up."

She took it from him and examined it. The colour was pretty but she didn't think it looked terribly promising as food. A doctor wouldn't give her anything bad, she reasoned. She took a bite and immediately spat it out on the table.

"Taste receptors are working." Now he was an amused doctor. "You'll like that a lot better with the peel *off.*" He took it from her and began removing the outer covering.

She watched him for a few moments, then decided it was as good a time as any to ask questions. "Um… I don't mean to be

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rude," she said, "but… am I supposed to know you?"

As if someone had flipped a switch, the doctor was gone and he was staring at her again, like he didn't know what to do. Finally, he said, "Actually, we've never met. I'm Doctor Dyson Ido." He nodded at the woman, who had just come in from the laboratory. "This is Nurse Gerhad." The woman's warm smile made her feel a bit less anxious about asking her next question.

"Okay, I don't quite know how to say this—" She took a steadying breath. "Do you happen to know who *I* am?"

The doctor and nurse looked at each other, taken aback by the question. Her heart sank a little.

"I was hoping you'd fill in that part. Since you're a Total Replacement cyborg, and most of your cyber body was destroyed, I can't find any records."

They looked at each other again, and this time she had the distinct impression Nurse Gerhad was displeased about something.

"But your very *human brain* was miraculously intact," Dr Ido went on after a moment. "Theoretically, you should remember something."

"Oh," she said. "Well, uh…" She thought for a moment. "It's pretty blank." They were looking at her expectantly. Her heart—or whatever she had as a Total Replacement cyborg—sank a little more. "It's completely blank, actually."

She didn't have to be a doctor herself to know that wasn't right at all. There should have been *something*, even if it was only a vague image: someone she knew or a place where she'd been, or a few words someone had spoken to her—whoever *that* was, or had been. All at once she felt like the world was becoming less solid, like she was about to fall through it into

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nothing.

"I don't even know my name!" Tears welled up in her eyes and spilled down her face.

"I know this is all very new and strange," the doctor said in the warm, kindly voice she was already growing to love. "But you're not alone—I'm here with you. I'm going to protect you and everything is going to be okay. And let's look on the bright side." The doctor dabbed at her face with a napkin as he handed her the thing he had finished peeling. "Your tear ducts are working."

She couldn't help smiling a little. That was just the sort of thing a very kind doctor would say. Although how she could know that but not her own name made no sense at all. She bit into the thing he'd given her. This time, there was an explosion of taste in her mouth; the feel of the pulp between her teeth and a flood of liquid that overflowed and ran down her chin was delightful. Suddenly she no longer felt like crying, about anything.

"This is *good*!" she said, looking from Ido to Gerhad and back again. "What do you call this?"

She saw the nurse give Ido a wry half-smile. "It's *your* fee, *you* tell her. And make sure she knows it's not money anywhere else in town."

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CHAPTER 23

Alita had no idea how long she had been sitting on the bench outside the OR. Ten hours, ten days, ten centuries—she couldn't tell one period of time from any other. If she'd had to guess, she'd have gone with centuries. She would have waited that long for her Hugo. Ido said she was three hundred years old—what were a few more centuries between friends? As long as Hugo lived, she didn't care how long it took.

When she finally heard the OR door open, she bounced up in front of Ido, tears welling in her eyes, ready to spill down her cheeks.

"How—How is he?" she asked, afraid to raise her voice above a whisper.

Ido dabbed at her face with a soft cloth. "You can see for yourself. He's in Recovery now."

Alita dashed past him.

* * *

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Even if the body wasn't a Berserker, it was A-grade, a composite that Ido had made himself, using the best parts and materials he could find. It was his own design, and when he had finished it, he had put it away carefully in cold storage, refusing to raid it for parts, no matter how depleted the clinic's inventory was. He'd had a hunch that someday this body would save a life, and when the time came, he didn't want anything missing.

Gerhad had been watching over Hugo since they'd wrapped up the cyber-surgery. In the past few weeks, they had done more embodying procedures than most reputable doctors did in a year. When things quieted down, Ido was going to suggest to Gerhad that she go for certification as a doctor—i.e., just take the test. She had enough experience in cyber-surgery to count as coursework.

Now she stepped aside with a smile as Alita went to Hugo's side. "He's good," Gerhad told her. "He's stable. No question, he'll be all right."

Alita touched Hugo's steel hand, so much like her own now. It wouldn't be as sensitive because it wasn't Urm technology, but it was the best work in Iron City, state of the art, top of the line. And maybe it wasn't such a bad thing that it wasn't as good as Alita's, Ido thought; the prospect of two Urm Berserkers running around together was a little scary.

"I'm sorry, Alita," Ido said. She looked up from Hugo, her expression mildly puzzled. "This city—eventually it finds a way to corrupt even the best of us and somehow the wrong people pay too dearly for other people's sins. Hugo didn't deserve what happened to him. Fortunately, Chiren's surgical technique was brilliant—genius actually, rigging your circulatory system to include Hugo as part of your body. There's no brain damage at

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all. And that brilliant heart of yours was strong enough for both of you."

"Chiren knew how to do it," Alita said, smiling through her tears. "If it weren't for her, he'd be dead."

Ido had a sudden mental image of Chiren in the cathedral, helping Alita and Hugo, and his heart skipped a beat, the way it had when he'd seen Chiren holding their daughter, talking to her, playing with her, rocking her to sleep. Chiren's blue eyes hadn't been cold then, they'd been bright, full of life and love. During those years when Motorball had been the outlet for their talent, they had been busy and happy, creating champions for a game they both couldn't get enough of, and he had constructed a new body for their daughter, hoping to replace the one that wasn't strong enough.

But when the game had betrayed them and destroyed their beautiful girl, Chiren's heart had frozen and she had gone over to the kind of life that they'd promised themselves they'd never live.

Well, *he* had promised. He'd thought she had, too. But, to Chiren, life had broken its promise, rendering any promises she'd made null and void. As time passed, Ido had begun to wonder if there was something in Chiren that had always been drawn to the worst that Iron City had to offer, and losing their daughter had simply freed her to follow.

Either way, he'd thought the spirit of the woman he had loved had died with their little girl. But apparently, he was wrong—there was still a spark of his Chiren alive inside the ice queen.

* * *

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"You had her heart in your hands—*in your hands!*—and you let her live." Vector came around his desk to grab Chiren by her upper arms and look into her face. "Why? Just tell me that. *Why?"*

She didn't try to twist away, didn't even yell at him for putting his hands on her when he was angry. Maybe she'd finally lost her mind. Entirely possible—she'd always been a little off. If he could sell Nova on the story that his Tuner had gone mad, and if Nova would give him a break for his past loyal service, he'd have Alita all boxed up and delivered within twenty-four hours. With whipped cream and a cherry on top.

"Well?" Vector gave Chiren a hard shake. "Do you even *know* why?"

Chiren was silent for so long he thought he was going to have to shake her a whole lot harder. Then she straightened up and looked him right in the eye.

"Because I'm a doctor. And a mother." She lifted her chin in defiance. "Somehow I'd forgotten that."

Vector pushed her away and threw his hands in the air. "And what the hell am I supposed to do with *that*?"

Chiren turned her back on him, on the view of Zalem, and on his enormous shiny desk. "I can't do this any more. It was one thing when it was just big stupid beasts fighting each other in the streets or on the Motorball track. But this—" She shook her head and walked towards the door. "I'm leaving."

"Chiren, *wait*!" It came out sounding more desperate than he'd have liked. She stopped, although she only turned her head a little instead of turning around.

"I understand now I can't keep you here any longer," Vector said slowly, doing sincere as if his life depended on it, because it

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probably did. "But if you're going to leave, don't you think it's time—past time, really—that you left for Zalem?"

Now she did turn around, and for a moment he wondered if she had seen the shadow behind the opaque glass of the door. But the way she was looking at him, her eyes too bright with tears of joy and her face alive with hope and gratitude, he knew she hadn't.

* * *

It had been hard, but Ido finally managed to get Alita out of the OR so Hugo could get some rest. She couldn't stop herself from talking to him, and if she kept it up, he would wake up too soon. Hugo needed all the rest he could get before he faced the world in this new and different body.

O brave new body, that has a Hugo in it.

Ido shook the thought away. His mind always generated nonsense when he was overtired. But sleep would have to wait; his patient was going to need him. Two patients, really—somehow he had to make Alita understand that what was normal, even exhilarating, for her would be traumatic for someone who'd been completely organic before waking up as a Total Replacement cyborg.

On the plus side, Hugo was young enough that his brain was still growing, so his central nervous system would probably adjust more easily to its new embodiment and accept it as natural. On the other hand, what had happened to his father would make it very difficult for Hugo to accept what had happened to him. And then there was what Ido would have to tell him about his grand dream of going to Zalem. He was going

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to take that hard—once he got Hugo to believe him, anyway. He was having a hard enough time convincing Alita of the truth.

"Vector was running a scam on Hugo," Ido said wearily. "I told you, if you're *born* on the ground, you *stay* on the ground—no exceptions, not for any amount of money. And the only way to get from down here to up there is to become Motorball Final Champion. That's it. You can*not* buy your way up there. No one can."

"How do you know that?" Alita said.

"Because *I'm* from Zalem," Ido said finally. "I was born there," He pointed at the small pale scar in the centre of his forehead. "I used to have the same mark Chiren has—the mark of Zalem. I removed it myself. Because our daughter wasn't perfect, because she was ill, Chiren and I were forced into exile with her down here. The magnificent floating city doesn't tolerate the weak, the sick, the defective. The man responsible is Nova, the Watcher behind the eyes. And because I fathered something imperfect, I couldn't go back up there if I wanted to."

Alita was staring at him wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

"And *that* is how I know Hugo was never going to get to Zalem. Hugo was conned. Vector's nothing more than a jumped-up con artist who doesn't care about anyone. He just strings them along with promises so they'll keep doing whatever he wants."

Alita peered at him with a searching look, as if she were trying to find some evidence in his face that he was wrong, even as her shoulders slumped and her eyes lost their brightness. She knew he was telling her the truth.

"I'm sorry," Ido added, wishing he were apologising for being wrong instead of right. He was about to say something

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Berserker. She hugged him tightly, keeping him still until Ido could sedate him. Hugo bristled when he felt the needle go into his neck, then slumped in Alita's arms.

"It will be better tomorrow," Ido promised gently.

Hugo raised his eyes and looked at Ido in despair. "What good is tomorrow to a dead man?"

"*I* see you," Alita told him as she carried him back to the table. "As long as we have each other, nothing else matters." She held his hand while Ido reconnected the IV lines and the nutrient feed. They hadn't broken, at least.

It wasn't supposed to be like this, she thought sadly. Only a few short weeks ago, he'd been helping her train for her big tryout. Her big tryout—what a joke *that* turned out be. Before that, he'd taken her out to the crashed spacecraft in the Badlands, to show her something that might help her with her memory. To help her, to help her—he'd done everything he could to help her. And in return, he'd been framed for murder and, for the grand finale, run through with a Hunter's sword. And he owed it all to her and her insistence on remembering her past.

"I wish I'd never found out who I was," Alita blurted suddenly. "It's only made everyone I love suffer! I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Ido turned her around to face him. "Don't you *ever* apologise for who you are," he said, his face intent and serious. "This is why you're here. You're the only one built for this."

She nodded, smearing away tears with the back of one metal hand. "And I have to face it all head on." Suddenly she caught sight of herself in the mirror over the sink. For a moment, she stood very still, feeling the Damascus Blade in her hand, feeling

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a purpose in herself that was slowly making itself clear to her.

Staring at her reflection, Alita became aware of a drop of water shimmering at the lip of the tap. It hung there for another second before it fell. The Damascus Blade was a bright streak in the air as she cut the drop in half.

"I want to thank you," Ido said as she turned back to him. "Because of you, I got to see my little girl grow into an exceptional woman. One who's going to save the world."

"Thank you, Father." Alita said as Ido dried her tears again. She leaned over and kissed Hugo gently on the forehead before she left.

* * *

The Factory doors rumbled open. Alita stood with the daylight at her back, wondering how she must look to the Centurians lining the walls—a small silhouette standing in a rectangle of brightness. Something long and slightly curved extended down from her right hand, heat shimmers rippling in the air around it. Blue plasma cast no shadow but it was as real as anything—as real as the Damascus Blade, as real as she was and what she had come here to do.

"Vectorrrrrrr!" she roared.

The Centurians' gun turrets swivelled around to point at her. Her Berserker reaction time put her ten metres into the hall by the time they fired at the spot where she had been. Still firing, the guns swivelled again, shooting chunks out of the floor, the walls, the ceiling as they tried to get a fix on her. More Centurians stumped into the hallway, spraying the place with bullets and taking out other Centurians in the process. Someone

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had adjusted their programming from KILL-INTRUDER TO KILL-INTRUDER-AT-ALL-COSTS, and Alita was pretty sure she knew who that was.

Unhurt, she vaulted onto the back of one of the reinforcements and plunged her plasma hand into its brain case, causing it to freeze. The others registered her location but she had already leaped away as they shot the frozen Centurian into scrap. She bounced up beside another, sliced off its gun with the Damascus Blade and dragged it along with her.

"Violation! Violation!" A deckman came down off the bounty platform and rolled towards her.

Oh, come on—seriously? It really was no more than a tin can, and not a very good one. Alita used the Centurian's gun to blow it to pieces.

Past the bounty platform, she saw a bank of three elevators. Two went no higher than the floor where Vector's office and penthouse suite were located. The third stopped on the level below, where there was maintenance access.

* * *

Vector had already been waiting several hours for dispatch to pick up the cabinet in his office and send it up to Zalem when the alert came in from Security. The cyborg girl his hired thugs had failed to kill, Alita, was coming up the front steps, and she was obviously loaded for bear. After the past couple of days, he wasn't in the mood for any more of her steel-assed bullshit and he'd set the Centurians to "Overkill". After they obliterated her, he intended to send whatever was left up in a plastic bag to the Watcher. If Nova wanted her heart so bad, he could piece it back

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together like a jigsaw puzzle.

Vector was pretty sure the Centurians would close Alita's case before she got as far as the bounty platform. But the gunfire went on and on and Vector began to get annoyed. It was one thing for a gang of hired killers to screw up—it wasn't like any of them were geniuses. But Centurians had big guns, a perfect aim, and they couldn't be outsmarted or distracted in a limited space like the entry hall.

When the sound of gunfire finally died away, Vector stabbed the intercom key.

"Security, report!" he barked. "Did you get her?"

He waited for someone to babble apologies for the noise, but there was no response.

"Security, dammit, report!"

Still nothing. Someone was definitely going to die before the day was out. He was trying to decide who and how many when his skylight exploded.

Shards of glass rained down on him, cutting his face and hands, sticking in his hair and clothing. He tried to brush himself off and ended up pushing the glass even deeper into his skin. A whole bunch of people were going to die for this, Vector thought, momentarily blind with rage. The stupid skylight was supposed to be shatterproof, made with the same kind of glass they used in Zalem. Obviously someone had swapped out the good stuff and left him with Iron City crap while making themselves a fortune on the black market. When he found out who, he was going to kill them so hard it would wipe out everyone in a six-block radius—

Then he saw her in the middle of the room, and all thought ceased.

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Alita assumed a fighter's stance: knees slightly bent, hands up to protect her face as she glowered at him. Like she felt she mattered to him—like she mattered *at all*. She looked around, straightened up and walked over to his desk. "You were never going to send Hugo to Zalem," she accused him, her big eyes as dark as her voice. "Were you?"

"I *always* keep my promises to send people up," he said, but he could tell she didn't buy that. What the hell—the girl wasn't getting out of his room alive; it wouldn't matter if she knew. "Like Dr Chiren here," Vector added, gesturing vaguely at the cabinet in the corner of his office. Alita looked at where he gestured, then back at him with a puzzled expression.

Vector walked over to the cabinet and rapped his knuckles on it, but the girl still didn't get it. He shrugged and deactivated the seal so he could open the front. If dispatch came now, they could just wait a few minutes, he thought, as a little vapour snaked out of the refrigerated interior. As long as he didn't leave the door open too long, nothing would spoil. A minute or two would probably do it. Alita wouldn't be able to distinguish any of Chiren's packaged internal organs from the mystery meat they sold in the market, and she probably wouldn't recognise Chiren's hands, as lovely as they were. But he was sure she'd know those blue eyes. They were packaged separately in transparent containers and secured side by side, to indicate they were a set. They were as beautiful and as cold as they had ever been. Literally cold.

"If dispatch ever get their asses in gear, she'll go up with the rest of tonight's shipment." Vector gave the girl another few seconds to be thoroughly horrified before he closed the cabinet up and reactivated the seal. "Who the hell knows what the boss

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does with any of this." He rapped his knuckles on the case again. "And *that* is the only way anyone *ever* gets to Zalem."

Vector smiled, seeing the shadow through the opaque glass in the door behind Alita. This was going to be good.

* * *

Alita saw Vector start to duck just as the door crashed inwards. Berserker reaction time let her protect her face from the various fragments, which bounced harmlessly off her body. But the grind-cutter didn't bounce. It sliced through her side and she fell to the floor, holding the wound as bright-blue cyber-blood poured out between her fingers.

"I knew you would not wait for your fate to find you," Grewishka said, towering over her in ugly triumph.

Then he vanished.

* * *

They were under attack.

Zalem was under attack. The wind was screaming past her ears as the supply tube she was climbing with the rest of her squad shivered and rocked—not much, but enough to make it tricky to hang on. They were up pretty high but they still had some distance to go. Gelda was leading them, urging them upwards, reminding them every metre, every centimetre, every millimetre was a gain.

At this height, they had to be ready for the bladed rings that appeared without warning and slid down along the supply tubes.

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These were the floating city's defence against any ground-dwellers foolish enough to think they could simply climb to a better life in a better place, neither of which they had any right to. Alita and her squad had already fired on a few with plasma rifles and shoulder-mounted missile launchers, blowing them into fragments that went spinning off into the void.

The squad had just destroyed another one when the side of the tube blew out.

Earth and sky slewed crazily as Alita clung to the tube, dragging herself forward until she was clinging to the jagged, still-hot edge of the hole. The wind was quickly drying splashes of heart's-blood and cyber-blood on the tube and on the parts of dead and dying cyborgs still stuck to the metal.

Her whole squad was gone, she realised. *Now* what was she supposed to do?

A hand reached down and clamped onto her wrist. Alita looked up to see Gelda's torn face, bleeding blue in some spots, seeping red in others.

"You know Zalem's defences!" Gelda shouted at her over the wind. "*Finish the mission!*"

Finish the mission—

* * *

Grewishka was back, looming over her. Under her fingers, Alita felt the wound in her side closing up, healing itself, and she knew it wasn't just temporary sealant.

How about that? She got to her feet.

"I know who you are," she said to Grewishka, her voice low and dangerous. "You're a child of the underworld, taken to live

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up here as a slave. And I'm just an insignificant girl." As she spoke, she felt a sudden profound pity for Grewishka, for the utter tragedy of the life he had been forced to live. "Die knowing this—the people who did this terrible thing to you will suffer. I'll *make* them suffer."

Grewishka laughed at her and she found it in herself to pity him even more. Chiren had rebuilt him into something like a walking truck. His thick arms and bulky shoulders were vaguely suggestive of a gorilla but there was no life in them, only machinery. His torso was a distinct triangle, made so his lower body could be attached easily. His thick metal legs were shaped like a human's, but such exaggerated musculature didn't exist organically; his feet were more like a Centurian's.

And all of this was topped off with the last vestige of his humanity. His head and face were protected by his over-built shoulders. To Alita, however, it looked less like protection and more like the machinery was swallowing him.

The body was no good for anything except killing—killing *her*, to be precise. Grewishka had become nothing more than a Centurian with more metal and less purpose.

"My master Nova is *so* eager to meet you," Grewishka said. "Allow me to introduce you!"

The intake doors on Alita's arm opened with a discreet hushed noise as they drew air in. Blue fire blossomed on her hand, flowed over the pommel of the Damascus Blade and ran along its length like a living thing.

Sneering, Grewishka pointed and his grind-cutter flew out from his hand. There was a blinding flash of blue light and then the grind-cutter was writhing impotently on Vector's shiny marble floor.

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The cyborg bellowed with rage and fired all the rest of his grind-cutters at once. Alita leaped into the air, performing a whirling dance with the brilliant blue flames, moving too fast for Grewishka's brute eyes to follow. But afterwards he had no trouble seeing the other four grind-cutters dying on the floor like headless snakes.

Grewishka raised both fists and charged at her. She dodged him effortlessly and one fist demolished one of Vector's absurdly ostentatious pillars, leaving a pile of rubble below the ragged piece of stone hanging down from the ceiling like a weird stalactite.

Time slowed as she somersaulted over Grewishka's head. In his bewildered, upturned face, she caught the barest hint of the innocent he'd never really been, before she dropped straight down, driving the Damascus Blade so that it bisected him from top to bottom. Alita landed on one knee with her back to the monster, not wanting to see the two pieces fall away from each other.

This city—eventually it finds a way to corrupt even the best people.

Ido had said that, and she had told him the problem wasn't the streets or anything else in the city, but up above. There was no pleasure in knowing she was right, she thought as she got to her feet and turned to Vector, who was cowering behind his desk.

"No, no, wait!" he pleaded, backing away from her as she moved towards him. "Please, just wait—" He tripped on nothing and fell on his expensive ass. Alita walked around the desk, watching him try to scuttle away from her like a bug. She raised her arm and drew it back so the point of the Damascus Blade

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was aimed at his left eye.

"Speak," she commanded.

"Sure, what do you want me to say? I'll say anything, tell you anything," Vector babbled. He was backed up against another of his stupid classical-knock-off pillars. "Anything, just tell me what to say—"

"Not *you*," Alita said. "*Him*."

Vector had a fraction of a second to look terrified before his eyes went dead and his face lost all expression.

"So we finally meet, Alita," he said in a calm, inhuman voice.

"Nova." The name felt like a profanity.

"May I?" asked the Watcher, making a small gesture at the space between them. When she didn't move, he shrugged, got to his feet, and made a business of smoothing Vector's clothing and brushing off any remaining bits of glass, ignoring the cuts and scratches they left on Vector's skin.

"Where are you?" Alita asked.

"Home, as we speak. Feet up. Very comfortable." He glanced out of the window at the floating city, then moved past her to sit Vector's body on the edge of the desk. He was looking at her with what she realised was supposed to be a mischievous grin. But implanted optics didn't twinkle, and neither did Vector's dead eyes.

"Well, my girl, you've certainly exceeded all expectations, mine included," he said. As if he were complimenting a small child on their homework. "Killing my champion Grewishka—most impressive! And turning a selfish creature like Chiren to your side—I never saw *that* coming. You're definitely more interesting to me alive than dead. And we're from the same

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place, which in these hard and perilous times makes us practically *family.*"

She waited, her sword ready and unwavering.

"You can go ahead and walk out of here and the Factory will not stop you." The Watcher made Vector wink at her—a neat yet nauseating trick for someone who hadn't had eyelids in centuries. "*This* time."

"I don't need *your* permission to live," she said evenly.

"Ah, but others might." He chuckled. "Your precious Dr Ido, for example. And what about your beloved Hugo? Yes, I know he's still alive. Although not for long—we'll track him down." Nova laughed again. "I've found the best way to enjoy immortality is to watch others die."

Fury surged through her. She gave Vector's body a hard shove that put him flat on his back on the desk with his legs dangling, then raised the Damascus Blade with both hands. All at once the Watcher vanished and it was just Vector on the desk, looking terrified.

"Please, *don't*!" he begged. "I'll do anything! I'll make you a champion in the Game. You're good. The crowd loves you! I'll give you anything you want, just *please don't kill me*!"

And then as Alita was staring at him in uncertainty, the Watcher was back. "See? No character. None whatsoever."

In answer, Alita drove the Damascus Blade through the centre of his chest, pinning him to the wood.

"Then you'll enjoy losing your puppet," Alita said.

Nova lifted Vector's head to look at the sword sticking out of him. "That does look fatal," he agreed. "Well, no matter. Vector was getting tiresome." He coughed; heart's-blood leaked from his mouth and he began to tremble. But still the Watcher

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kept his eyes clear and focused. "Oh, Alita, you poor child. Everything you've gone through and still no answers."

"And you've just made the biggest mistake of your life," Alita said matter-of-factly.

"What would that be?" asked the Watcher, as if indulging a clever but insolent child.

"You let me live."

Nova made Vector smile, exposing blood-soaked teeth. "Then adieu, until our next meeting. And remember—" He was losing his hold on the last shreds of Vector's life. "*I see everything.*"

He was gone. Alita pulled the Damascus Blade free, letting Vector's body slide to the floor. She stared at his corpse, but there was no pity in her for the man who had lied so egregiously to Hugo, to Chiren, and to all the other sad, lost souls who'd thought they could get out of Iron City in one piece.

Her phone rang, making her jump. For a moment she was afraid it was *him*, with one last word. But her relief at hearing Ido's voice was short-lived.

"Factory enforcers came looking for Hugo," he told her. "Somehow they found out he'd been kept alive. I sneaked Hugo out of here but they've sealed the city. The Factory's determined to find him."

"Do you know where he went?" Alita asked.

"He—oh, God, Alita, he's trying to go up."

Y'know, if I were as strong as you, I'd climb that tube to Zalem right now.

Alita ran to the window and looked out, scanning each of the spider-leg supply tubes until she made out a tiny figure working his way upwards to the flying city he thought was heaven. Only

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because he didn't know what really lived there.

You know Zalem's defences—

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* * *

It was after the first third of the length of the supply tube that Hugo would have begun to struggle. Even hardcore adrenaline junkies willing to gamble that Centurians would be too busy to show up and shoot them down had never gone higher and never, despite their claims, scratched their initials into the tube. They couldn't have—they'd have needed both hands to hang onto the bucking, swaying pipe.

If they actually *had* gone higher, however, they'd have found themselves in real trouble. The middle stretch of every tube had sensors to detect pressure and movements produced by someone engaged in purposeful climbing. The sensors would then trigger the bladed rings, sending them down towards would-be trespassers. They were virtually impossible to avoid, and the only way to get rid of them was to destroy them. Few climbers were strong enough to carry weapons that powerful. Even if they were, there was still the possibility of being blown to smithereens by a mine left over from the War. Even a squad of Berserkers could get chewed up and spit out.

Anyone foolhardy enough to try scaling a supply tube usually attracted a Centurian before going any higher than twenty feet. The Centurian would invite the daredevil to dismount under penalty of law, allowing thirty seconds for compliance. After that there was no further warning before the penalty of law kicked in.

Hugo had picked the one time in the history of Iron City when, thanks to the spectacular snafu of Vector's "Overkill" command, there were no Centurians available to shoot him down. The handful of still-functioning Centurians were aware

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"Please—*please* listen to me, Hugo! I've been here already —I mean, *here*, in this spot—and it's right where Nova wants us! Nova's the Watcher behind the eyes and he's using you to get to me! We have to go back down *now*!"

Hugo shook his head. "If I go back down there, I'm dead! Don't you understand that?"

"I can fight them off!" Alita was almost close enough to touch him. "We can make a run for the Badlands. They'll never follow us!"

The Badlands; Hugo thought of the day he'd taken her to the Urm ship (with Koyomi and Tanji, and for a moment the memory of his friend was a knife in his heart). He looked past her, down the length of the supply tube, and then up to where it disappeared into a low-hanging cloud. What was the Badlands or any other place compared to a city in the sky?

"We belong up there!" he called to Alita.

Alita shook her head vehemently. "We don't belong *anywhere*! You and I are the same, Hugo. You're the only one who sees *me*, and I'm the only one who knows you for who you really are!" Her eyes welled with tears, not because of the wind, and it occurred to Hugo that he was always making her cry.

"We'll always be on the run!" he called to her.

"We'll be *together*!" she yelled. "Please, come back down with me so we can go home—wherever that is—*together*!"

The love shining in her face was wide, deep and unconditional, and he finally understood that without it he had nothing. Hugo stretched out his arm to her.

Alita moved up a little more and reached for him. "We can go home," she said, straining to touch him.

I almost threw away the only thing of value in my life, Hugo

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thought as his heart filled with every feeling he had ever wanted.

The hideous roar and clang from above startled him so much he almost lost his grip on the tube. He looked up to see a horrific circle of metal burst through the cloud and bear down on him in a halo of spinning teeth.

* * *

This time, she had no squad, no plasma rifle, no missile launcher. Alita reached for Hugo, intending to leap over the ring, and found that somehow she was already in his arms and *he* was lifting *her* over the bladed ring. Their combined weight should be enough to keep them from being blown away, she thought, and aimed herself so they would touch down on the tube again together. Always together.

Except something had gone badly, terribly, horribly wrong—Hugo was suddenly so light, he almost flew out into empty space. From the chest down, his body had been chewed away, and heart's-blood and cyber-blood streamed out from him on the wind. Berserker reaction time let her catch his hand just in time.

With her other hand, she drove the Damascus Blade into the supply tube as an anchor, and there they stayed.

* * *

"Hold on, Hugo, please!"

Hugo looked up at her. She was beautiful even like this, clinging to the side of a supply tube with the wind blowing her hair every which way while she strained to save him. He would

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have gladly held on for as long as she wanted him to—an hour, a year, a thousand years—except his arm wasn't going to last another minute. The ring had chomped him good, killing every connection in his cyber-body. His arm was going to come apart before he could even bleed to death.

Show's over, thank you and good night.

"I love you, Hugo!"

He realised that Alita was trying to pull him up and shift him onto her back. It wasn't going to work. He was going to let her down again and this time he couldn't help it.

"I'm glad I had the chance to know you. To love you," Hugo told her. His arm came apart. "Goodbye—"

She shot away from him at high speed. Still, Hugo went on looking into her eyes even after he couldn't see her any more.

* * *

Hugo's face was dreamy as he fell away from her, as if he were flying off to somewhere beautiful, like the Zalem he'd always believed in, and not falling to his death in a place he'd spent his life trying to escape.

Or as if she'd find him waiting for her at the cathedral, so they could climb the tower and look up at Zalem and the bright, unmoving star.

As if his arm hadn't fallen to pieces in her grip.

As if he hadn't been chewed up by a machine made by a man who needed the suffering of others to relieve the terrible boredom of his immortality.

Alita threw back her head and screamed defiance and rage and loss at the sky and everything in it.

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CHAPTER 25

Nova heard her.

Chrome optics weren't his only enhancements, and there had been many upgrades since the young battle prodigy had first spotted him watching her spar with her sensei Gelda in the zero-g sphere.

That hadn't been the first time he had watched her, nor the last. He had kept track of her over the years—the centuries—and when she had finally fallen, he'd thought she had met her end.

In hindsight, he should have known better. Gelda herself had said it: this girl, this Alita as she was known now, would never give up, never stop. *Never. Stop.*

And after Dyson Ido had lifted her out of the trash pile, she never had. She had opened her eyes in a completely different world, with only a few fragmented memories of her life, but she was still who and what she had always been: the warrior who would never give up, never stop. This was bound to bring a great deal of suffering to everyone around her.

But the best, most entertaining, part was that she had no idea.

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visible at night, and it was most easily seen from the edge of Zalem. The people in Iron City couldn't see it at all, which was just as well. They might start asking questions they'd never get answers to. No one in Zalem knew why the beam of light was there or what was on the other end, and it really didn't concern them. They were all too busy with their own pursuits and amusements.

* * *

The man in the silvery suit watched the very end of the sunset from his usual spot on the observation deck at the edge of Zalem. He knew how important things like aesthetics, beauty and amusements were to maintaining a stable society, suspended in the air or otherwise. Currently, the most popular amusement in Zalem was Iron City Motorball. The people just couldn't get enough of it. Bread and circuses; it had ever been thus; and as above, so below. Iron City couldn't get enough Motorball either, especially now.

His own taste in amusement had evolved to include a lot of abstract concepts and conditions over the course of his long life. Fortunately, cyborgs provided entertainment that went well beyond their bashing each other to pieces. It was incredible how cyborgs that were more machine than organic flesh could spend most of their waking hours *emoting*. The tragic death scene he had enjoyed thanks to his enhanced sight and hearing—*that* had been exceptional. The cyborg girl who saved her boyfriend's life by turning him into the thing he was most afraid of becoming, which was, in fact, exactly what his one true love happened to be —oh, the drama, the humanity! And her scream of anguish at the

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end!

Better yet, she was *still* screaming, with everything she did, with every fibre of her being. It was a different kind of screaming, not audible to the ear, perceptible only to those with a true appreciation of human nature, who knew that it was the nature of humans to suffer. Now *that* was entertainment.

* * *

Tonight he was using his enhanced hearing to listen to the Motorball stadium announcer wax rhapsodic about tonight's game.

"The Second League waited for a long time for a new hero, someone they could follow, someone worth cheering for, who would never let them down! Well, I'd say they found their hero in a rookie who came out of nowhere! In the first five games of the season, her point record has been *outstanding*, a record-breaker—ask anyone, they'll tell you! There isn't a soul in Iron City who doesn't know this little beauty's name!"

The man at the railing smiled. A smile which, on his face, was terrifying, without warmth or humour or humanity, an expression of pleasure taken in the kinds of things that should never happen, or even be imagined.

He hoped the little heroine remembered what he'd told her: that he saw everything. He wondered how long it would take before she understood that all of it, bread and circus, belonged to him and, being part of the circus, so did she.

* * *

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hands to acknowledge the crowd and looked to where Ido and Gerhad were sitting in their usual seats. Then she slid the Damascus Blade down into her grasp and turned to point it straight at Zalem. Blue flame danced around her hand and along the length of the sword to flare at the tip.

So you see everything, Watcher? Then see this: I have declared war on you and war is the one thing I'm even better at than Motorball. I was made for war and I will not stop, I will not give up, and I will not be defeated. I will finish the mission: I will come for you and I will break you and throw the pieces off the edge of Zalem, to land in the trash pile below. Where you belong. Because I will not stand by in the presence of evil.

Ten thousand fans screamed their approval of the angel who dared to challenge heaven, loving her defiant strength, giving themselves to it, and embracing it as their own.

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